

## **Proposal to the California Biodiversity Council**

### **Tasks To Improve The Integration of Fuels Reduction with Species and Watershed Protection in Southern California**

June 9, 2004

#### **Proposal**

Drought-induced forest mortality across the San Bernardino, San Jacinto and Cuyamaca mountains, as well as the extensive fires in 2003, have increased the need to address the very high fire threats across Southern California. Wildfires have created risks to public safety and residential areas for decades. Severe fires can also damage critical habitats for many rare and unique plant and animal species. And they can impact watersheds that are central to downstream domestic water supplies. While a small fraction of the high fire threat areas burned in 2003, most of the area is still at a crisis level. There are increasing demands for a large-scale program of environmentally appropriate fuels reduction projects that address three key goals – public safety, species habitat protection, and watershed protection. The conditions have also attracted major Congressional interest, funding, and expectations.

CBC member agencies will help by providing executive-level direction and resources to pilot an integrated short-term program of fuels reduction work in the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains in the upper reaches of the Santa Ana River watershed. Lessons learned from this pilot work will also have applicability to other areas with high wildfire threats. The goal for this pilot project will be to get work done on the ground quickly while complying with environmental protection and the regulatory and review requirements of participating agencies. Well designed and completed projects will increase public safety as well as reduce the long term threats of extreme wildfires to critical habitats and watershed protection.

**Interagency team for implementing policy direction from the Principals Group.** Modeled on “Green Teams” used to streamline analysis and coordinate energy and other state and federal projects, this team will be formed with one or two contributed staff from each of the following agencies:

- California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
- California Department of Fish and Game
- Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board
- South Coast Air Pollution Control District
- USDA Forest Service
- USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service
- USDI Fish and Wildlife Service
- USDI Bureau of Land Management

The Team will accomplish three tasks. Task 1 and 2 will be completed in working meetings among field level staff and agency leaders. Task 3 will be completed using the results of tasks 1 and 2.

**Task 1.** Evaluate fuels projects that are currently planned for the Santa Ana watershed. At the first working meeting, participating agencies will describe their roles and responsibilities, as they related to fuels management projects, in the pilot area. The team will then review projects that are being planned on public and private land in the watershed. One goal for this work will be to determine if there are ways to quickly improve the efficiency or effectiveness of the project design and approval process. Large adjustments to ongoing work are not expected after this review because most projects being planned today are already avoiding sensitive areas. A second goal for reviewing current projects will be to identify bottlenecks and barriers to efficient coordination of fuels work and environmental protection. This work will be completed in two weeks or less.

**Task 2.** This task will evaluate the list of bottlenecks and barriers to efficient agency coordination. Using the results from Task 1, the interagency team will develop options for more efficient and effective planning and implementation of fuels reduction projects. The options will identify ways to simultaneously improve the efficiency of project planning while providing high-quality environmental protection. Methods may include such thing as new BMPs or other conditions for granting permit waivers, adjustments to survey protocols for high-risk habitats, or expedited consultation and review procedures. This work will be completed by August 15.

**Task 3.** Identify additional areas for high-priority fuels work. The last task for the Interagency Team will be to evaluate high fire hazard areas across the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains in the upper reaches of the Santa Ana River watershed, then compare them to areas with high values for public safety, wildlife habitat, clean water supplies and other important considerations. The goal is to have all participating agencies agreeing on the broad areas that will be the focus for planning fuels reduction projects over the next 2-5 years. The product will be a map of high-priority areas and a rough program of work for fuels reduction projects, including those that focus on long-term maintenance of important habitat and water quality. This work will be completed by August 31.

### **Supervisor and Leadership**

The Interagency Team will be comprised of staff from the participating agencies listed above. The team will coordinate with other entities, as appropriate. The team will begin meeting no later than July 1, 2004 and complete their work within 60 days. The team will be sponsored by all of the participating agencies. Leaders of participating agencies ("The Principals") will meet frequently during the pilot to discuss progress and guide ongoing work.